

As Japan fans out

Japan has been a global economic power. Not so well documented is its march forward in world culture

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WHEN I went to school in London over 20 years ago, the common refrain of my classmates was that the British invented, the American innovated and the Japanese copied. I often see that the image of the Japanese as great copiers remains entrenched among educated Indians. So, what I'm going to suggest in the following paragraphs might seem radical.

Well, one of many great things about returning to studies for a year is that this newly-established programme that I am on in IIM Calcutta institutionalises interaction with business leaders. The other day I heard one of the captains of Indian industry speak about how he tries to "see around the corner" to predict upcoming trends by observing China. According to him, current trends in China are an indicator of the waves approaching India. Some will peter out, but a significant number will survive.

His comments aroused in me curiosity as I wondered where the Chinese crystal ball gazers in turn looked to. I recalled the photo of the launch of the bullet train between Beijing and Shanghai that I had seen recently and my thoughts immediately went to Japan. That is right. With over 10,000 Japanese enterprises earnestly engaged in China irrespective of any political bickering about Yasukuni, Japan does seem to be a trend setter for China.

But, is it only for China that Japan serves as the trend setter? I believe not. Counter-intuitive though it may sound to Anglo-centric Indians, actually Japan has long been regarded as the epicentre of what is cool. When Howard Shultz took Starbucks on its international foray, it was Tokyo that he chose to start off with. If he could succeed in the tough, competitive Japanese market he would be able to expand elsewhere.

On the cultural front, Japanese comic books, animation, video games and increasingly music have long been popular in the US, especially in California. This California connection is important. Sushi connoisseurs

will have studied — or at least have tried to understand — the role of California in promoting sushi culture globally.

Kishore Biyani, the founder of Pantaloons, sees in Indian movies a reflection of current social trends. I suspect he is not alone. Many people see in films the signs of times to come. So, if you are watching *Kal Ho Na Ho* or *Kabhi Alvida Na Kehna*, you can perhaps predict trends in the evolution of our social mores.

The power of films is strong. It is recognised as the foundation of America's hegemony as the cultural superpower. Precisely because Hollywood is in Los Angeles, the Japan-California nexus becomes signifi-



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cant. It serves as the lever for projecting Japanese influences consciously and unconsciously to the rest of the world.

Let there be no doubt that, while Japan was and remains an economic superpower, it is fast emerging and being recognised as a cultural superpower. It has made inroads into East Asia and the US. It is my belief that cultural interaction will quietly creep into importance in Indo-Japanese relations, not mainly because of official diplomatic channels, but because increasingly that is where astute businessman will import their ideas from.

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